

*The Hodder Bible Commentary*

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Edited by Lee Gatiss

# ACTS

MARTIN C. SALTER



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The Hodder Bible Commentary  
Series Editor: Lee Gatiss

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## Series Preface

*The unfolding of your words gives light.*  
(Psalm 119:130)

The Hodder Bible Commentary aims to proclaim afresh in our generation the unchanging and unerring word of God, for the glory of God and the good of his people. This fifty-volume commentary on the whole Bible seeks to provide the contemporary church with fresh and readable expositions of Scripture which are doctrinally sensitive and globally aware, accessible for all adult readers but particularly useful to those who preach, teach and lead Bible studies in churches and small groups.

Building on the success of Hodder's NIV Proclamation Bible, we have assembled as contributors a remarkable team of men and women from around the world. Alongside a diverse panel of trusted Consultant Editors, they have a tremendous variety of denominational backgrounds and ministries. Each has great experience in unfolding the gospel of Jesus Christ and all are united in our aim of faithfully expounding the Bible in a way that takes account of the original text, biblical theology, the history of interpretation and the needs of the contemporary global church.

These volumes are serious expositions – not overly technical, scholarly works of reference but not simply sermons either. As well as carefully unpacking what the Bible says, they are sensitive to how it has been used in doctrinal discussions over the centuries and in our own day, though not dominated by such concerns at the expense of the text's own agenda. They also try to speak not only into a white, middle-class, Western context (for example), as some might, but to be aware of ways in which other cultures hear and need to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

As you tuck into his Word, with the help of this book, may the glorious Father 'give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better' (Ephesians 1:17).

Lee Gatiss, Series Editor

## *Consultant Editors*

The Series Editor would like to thank the following Consultant Editors for their contributions to the Hodder Bible Commentary:

Shady Anis (*Egypt*)  
Kirsten Birkett (*UK*)  
Felipe Chamy (*Chile*)  
Ben Cooper (*UK*)  
Mervyn Eloff (*South Africa*)  
Keri Folmar (*Dubai*)  
Kerry Gatiss (*UK*)  
Kara Hartley (*Australia*)  
Julian Hardyman (*Madagascar*)  
Stephen Fagbemi (*Nigeria*)  
Rosanne Jones (*Japan*)  
Henry Jansma (*USA*)  
Samuel Lago (*USA*)  
Andis Miežitis (*Latvia*)  
Adrian Reynolds (*UK*)  
Peter Ryan (*Australia*)  
Sookgoo Shin (*South Korea*)  
Myrto Theocharous (*Greece*)

# I

## New Beginnings

### ACTS 1

#### 1. *Commission and ascension • Acts 1:1–14*

#### Acts 1:1–3: The ongoing work

##### *Jesus taken up into heaven*

**I**n my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach <sup>2</sup>until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit

to the apostles he had chosen. <sup>3</sup>After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.

‘In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach . . .’ (Acts 1:1).

These opening words set the scene for Luke’s second volume and tell us what we ought to expect as readers.

Theophilus is a name also mentioned at the start of Luke’s first volume (Luke 1:3). We know almost nothing about him. His name means ‘loved by God’, but this is not necessarily an indication he was already a Christian.<sup>1</sup> He may have been a seeker; he could have been young in faith seeking clearer understanding.<sup>2</sup> He apparently had some interest in Luke’s work, and it is possible Luke saw him as a potential sponsor, an official of rank, who could enable his work to be taken before a greater audience.<sup>3</sup>

Luke reminds Theophilus that in his former book he had spoken of that which Jesus ‘began’ (*ērxato*) to do and to teach. Luke–Acts is a unity,

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<sup>1</sup> Marshall thinks Theophilus was probably a Christian and Luke’s work is intended to give him and others a reliable account of the beginning of Christianity. See I. Howard Marshall, *Acts* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 56.

<sup>2</sup> Witherington, *Acts*, 106.

<sup>3</sup> Peterson, *Acts*, 102.

with both parts narrating the ministry of Jesus, on earth and from heaven. The contrast between the two parts is not between the ministry of Jesus and the ministry of the church, but, as John Stott put it, ‘between two stages of the ministry of the same Christ’.<sup>4</sup>

In this second volume, Luke will report all that Jesus is *continuing* to do, from the right hand of the Father, by the power of his Holy Spirit, through the community of his followers.<sup>5</sup> The book of Acts is not merely an account of the growth and spread of the church. It is an account of the acts of the risen Lord seen in the remarkable spread of the gospel through the Graeco-Roman world.

Admittedly, ‘The Acts of the Apostles’ is a much snappier title than ‘The Acts of the Risen Jesus, through his Apostles, by the power of his Holy Spirit’, but the latter would be a more accurate description. It is an important reminder to us that the source, power and efficacy of our endeavours comes not from ourselves, but from our living Lord Jesus who is still at work today, advancing his mission through his church.

John Stott notes that this opening verse sets Christianity apart from every other world religion: ‘These [other religions] regard their founder as having completed his ministry during his lifetime; Luke says Jesus only began his.’<sup>6</sup>

Luke highlights the multiple post-resurrection appearances of Jesus to his disciples over a forty-day period, giving ‘many convincing proofs that he was alive’. Paul also mentions the post-resurrection appearances in 1 Corinthians 15:3–8 and will later remind King Agrippa that the events of Jesus’s life, including his death and resurrection, were ‘not done in a corner’ (Acts 26:23–6). Luke wants his audience to be assured that his account is historically credible, there are ‘many convincing proofs’, and what we are about to read is not myth or fable, but history. There are solid grounds for faith in Christ. The Jesus who really lived is the same Jesus who really lives.

It is also worth noting that Jesus’s resurrection is an affirmation, not a denial, of the physical body. This is not a platonic escape from the physical to a higher realm. Neither is it a reincarnation or transmigration of the

<sup>4</sup> John Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 32.

<sup>5</sup> Witherington suggests it is over-pressing the verb, *ἐρξατο*, since it could be translated simply as ‘all that Jesus did and taught’. Grammatically this is correct but, given the contextual and rhetorical prominence of the ascension and Pentecost, it seems Luke intends his audience to see the ministry of the church as the continuation of Jesus’s work from heaven, in the power of his Spirit. See Witherington, *Acts*, 9–10.

<sup>6</sup> Stott, *Acts*, 34.

soul. While this idea may be popular in some cultures, Jesus demonstrates that resurrection is nothing less than the renewal and glorification of our physical bodies.<sup>7</sup>

### Acts 1:4–8: Power to witness

<sup>4</sup>On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: ‘Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. <sup>5</sup>For John baptised with<sup>a</sup> water, but in a few days you will be baptised with<sup>a</sup> the Holy Spirit.’

<sup>6</sup>Then they gathered round him and asked him, ‘Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?’

<sup>7</sup>He said to them: ‘It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. <sup>8</sup>But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’

<sup>a</sup> <sup>5</sup> Or *in*

Verse 4 sets the expectation that carries the narrative towards Pentecost. Jesus tells his followers to wait in Jerusalem for ‘the gift my Father promised’. Just as John baptised with water, so the disciples are to be baptised with the Holy Spirit. It is another indicator of the dynamic nature of Luke’s work. The Holy Spirit will be a central character in the narrative driving the mission forward. The Spirit will enable signs and wonders (2:19), cause believers to speak with boldness (4:31), help the church to administer compassion (6:3), lead and guide individuals (8:29), encourage the church (9:31), begin (and prevent!) new missionary initiatives (13:2; 16:6) and establish elders over the church (20:28). The Holy Spirit is mentioned more than fifty times in the book of Acts. The Spirit is not an added extra to the life of the Christian or the church but is the life-giving power who births and animates the church. He is a divine person, not merely some sort of impersonal force. A Christian or a church without the Spirit is an oxymoron.

However, these verses do raise a question as to the possibility of being a Christian without the Holy Spirit. Are we meant to see the disciples as unregenerate pre-Pentecost?<sup>8</sup> And if they are already regenerate, is this

<sup>7</sup> Babu Immanuel Venkataraman, ‘Acts’, in *SABC*, 1453.

<sup>8</sup> Verses that suggest a pre-Pentecost regeneration on the part of the disciples are as follows: Matthew 8:26; 16:16–17; John 6:44; John 17:8, 12. It is hard to believe that they had come thus far without the regenerating work of the Spirit.

'baptism in the Spirit' a second blessing as in Pentecostal theology? At this stage we should note the Spirit is clearly at work before the Day of Pentecost, and we must affirm that, post Pentecost, 'becoming a Christian' and 'baptism in the Spirit' are synonymous.<sup>9</sup> The New Testament does not teach a second-blessing or post-conversion baptism in the Spirit. The Day of Pentecost, as we shall see, rather inaugurates a new and fuller blessing on the church in fulfilment of Joel's prophecy. Joel speaks of a day when the Spirit would be personally and permanently present to every believer. Pentecost is a unique and unrepeatable event in the history of God's redemptive plan, and not something the contemporary church should seek to repeat. We will explore this again as we encounter subsequent Spirit baptisms in the book of Acts.<sup>10</sup>

In verse 6 the disciples ask Jesus a question: 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?' What do they understand or expect in asking this question? Calvin said their question contained almost as many errors as words.<sup>11</sup> Yet the question is surely correct. Acts 1:3 has told us that Jesus was teaching about the kingdom of God. He spoke frequently of the kingdom in the Gospel (Luke 4:43; 7:28; 10:9; 12:31; 17:21). He described the kingdom as being 'near' (Luke 10:9, 11; 21:31). And Jesus has just conquered death itself. The question is surely a natural one – 'Are you now going to restore the kingdom?'<sup>12</sup>

The misunderstanding in the question is in continuing to think of the kingdom as a political and ethnic entity – 'Are you now going to restore the kingdom to *Israel*?' It seems the disciples understood Jesus's teaching on the kingdom to be about restoring something like the Davidic kingdom – a place of political power, wealth and status, with a Davidic king on the throne and the Romans expelled from their occupation. It is this understanding that Jesus corrects.

<sup>9</sup> In the Old Testament we can see the work of the Spirit, empowering for service, in the following places: Exodus 31:3; Deuteronomy 34:9; Judges 14:6; Psalm 51:11. The Old Testament looked forward to a day when the Spirit would be given to all with a new power (Numbers 11; Jeremiah 31; Ezekiel 36; Joel 2). For evidence that the work of regeneration and 'baptism in the Spirit' are synonymous in the New Testament, see Romans 6:4; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Colossians 2:11–12; Titus 3:5.

<sup>10</sup> For more on this issue, see the discussion in Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 763–87.

<sup>11</sup> John Calvin, *The Acts of the Apostles* (repr. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 43.

<sup>12</sup> Spencer notes, 'Restoration hopes were deeply rooted in classical prophecies of Israel's future and closely tied to the sacred space of Jerusalem/Zion' (see Isaiah 2:2–4; Micah 4:1–8; Zechariah 8:20–23. Cited in Peterson, *Acts*, 109.